

The Obstacles to Awakening: Part II of the Repentance Series

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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[[Master's Teachings](#)]

Editor's note: *Deeply concerned about the state of our world today—a world facing the crises of climate change, environmental degradation, instability and unrest, and eroding of moral values—Dharma Master Cheng Yen has appealed to her followers to engage in the practice of repentance. Though the collective problems of today's world seem beyond the control of ordinary individuals, the Master tells us that each of us in fact contribute to the problem in many different ways; that is why we need to return to our own heart and mind, and deeply reflect. (The repentance practice is introduced [here](#) .)*

The Dharma is like water that can clean our hearts and minds of impurities. These impurities hinder us. Our afflictions—ultimately rooted in greed, anger, ignorance, arrogance, and doubt—keep us from developing a pure, sincere mind that can draw close to the Dharma. Having these afflictions, we take unwholesome actions which create negative karma. As a result, we reap retribution, and the retribution makes life difficult for us. We get so caught up in it that we cannot appreciate the importance of the Dharma in awakening our insight and wisdom. Therefore, our actions continue to be wrong ones and we continue to create more negative karma.

This is how afflictions, unwholesome action, and karmic retribution obstruct us. Because of this, they are considered three obstacles to awakening.

The three obstacles

The first obstacle is affliction. We have three main kinds of afflictions: greed, anger, and ignorance. These hinder us on the path of learning Buddhism. With greed, anger, and ignorance in our hearts, our understanding of Buddhism would be distorted and it would be difficult to develop correct faith. For example, when we do a good deed, because of our selfishness, we would hope to gain merits or blessings for the good deed we've done. This is not correct faith. Correct faith is about learning to eliminate our selfish desires and greed, as well as anger and ignorance. So, in daily life, we also need to work on our temper. Learning Buddhism, we should strive to develop insight and understanding into life instead of losing our temper at the slightest thing.

The second obstacle is unwholesome actions. When we act wrongly, our wrong ways prevent us from doing other good things. There is a Chinese saying that all good deeds begin first with filial piety. If people are filial to their parents, they will naturally have respect for their teachers and what is taught to them. With filial piety and respect, people will naturally be good-natured and kind. On the other hand, if we treat our parents badly, we will likewise do many other bad deeds. When people encourage us to do good, we wouldn't consider it. This is how unwholesome actions create obstacles to the path of goodness.

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The third obstacle is karmic retribution. Due to the law of karma, we reap what we sow. The bad consequences of our actions also hinder us. For example, our karmic retribution determines where we are reborn. In the suffering realms of hell, the hungry ghost realm, and the animal realm, it will be difficult to encounter Buddhism. Though the heaven realm is without suffering, we would easily lose ourselves in pleasure and enjoyment and forget all about spiritual practice. Therefore, it is only in the human realm that we can truly encounter and learn the Buddha's teachings. But, as there is also suffering in the human realm, our negative karma and suffering can still be obstacles to our learning the Dharma.

Because of the three obstacles of affliction, unwholesome action, and karmic retribution, we have difficulty achieving awakening and ending our suffering. So, we have to take very good care of our heart and mind, to avoid giving rise to these three obstacles.

From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks
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